

Burning for Iole: Metaphor and Catharsis in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

Figurative language in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is a subject that has largely escaped close analysis in Classical scholarship. In this paper, I propose a causal link between Sophocles' use of metaphor and the arousal of pity and fear in the audience, leading to catharsis. I argue that, through the narrative events of the play, figurative language is transformed into the literal events, which it anticipates. In the course of this process, the metaphors that prefigure the crux of the drama—Heracles' death by fire—incite a premature sense of pity and fear in the audience, priming them for the ultimate “release” of these emotions in cathartic response. Metaphor thus functions as a catalyst for catharsis.

In order to demonstrate this claim, I consider three instances of metaphors that create an association between fire imagery and amorous passion and how these metaphors prefigure Heracles' death by combustion. While the symbol of the lover “burning” for his beloved is already a common *topos* by the 5th century, the connection between fire and *eros* in the *Trachiniae* goes beyond mere literary trope. Here, the playwright deploys this imagery to prefigure the fiery demise of Heracles, of which the mythic tradition would have made the audience keenly aware from the outset of the play. The sudden and intrusive reminder of Heracles' death early on in the sequence of narrative events that lead up to it evokes a premature pathos in the spectators, and instills in them a fear of events to come.

In the first pyric metaphor that we encounter, the sun god Helios is described as “burning” (φλογιζόμενον) and “afire with brilliant light” (λαμπρᾷ στεροπᾷ φλεγέθων). The images of fire and burning prefigure Heracles' tragic fate, when he is engulfed in the flames of his enchanted *peplos*. The emphasis on the burning of the sun also anticipates its fatal role in activating the poisons in Heracles' robe. The sudden intrusion of this harbinger of tragedy builds

a sense of impending doom through dramatic irony: the audience is reminded of its privileged omniscience (like the god Helios, who is frequently figured as a sympathetic spectator, we are in this sense “all-seeing”), and singular prescience of the tragic demise of Heracles, a fate of which none of the characters are aware.

The pervasive metaphor of fire and burning is also applied to Heracles himself, primarily in descriptions of him as a lover. For instance, at 368, he is characterized as “enflamed with desire” (ἐντεθέρμανται πόθῳ). Here, the messenger uses the phrase to metaphorically capture Heracles’ passion for Iole, his captive concubine. However, if taken proleptically, the phrase is rendered literal. Heracles *actually* burns as an indirect result of his lust for Iole. Deianeira’s envy then goads her to treat his cloak with a love potion to win his affections, but it turns out to be a flammable agent, literally causing Heracles to go up in flames. Heracles’ burning is thus a result of a two-fold desire: both his own, and that of his love-sick wife. The equation of fire and lust through metaphor also extends to the object of Heracles’ desire, namely Iole. Deianeira characterizes her as λαμπρὰ, “gleaming” (ἡ κάρτα λαμπρὰ καὶ κατ’ ὄμμα καὶ φύσιν, 377-79). She is the veritable source of Heracles’ erotic “burning.” It is likewise noteworthy that this epithet is spoken by Deianeira; through the lens of her subjective perception, this is the defining quality of Iole, her ability to enflame her husband.

The final pyric metaphor that I consider appears in Deianeira’s monologue at 436-469. Here, she claims that in spite of being compromised by her husband’s desire for another woman, she would not harbor resentment toward Iole herself even if Heracles burned with love for her (ἐντακεῖη τῷ φιλεῖν). The term ἐντακεῖη is most commonly translated in this context as “absorbed” in passion. However, the term also belongs to the semantic field of metal working, referring to the pouring of molten metals (LSJ s.v. ἐντήκω, “pour in while molten”). Here, the

word could be interpreted with nuances of the latter (“molten with love” or “liquefied by love”) and thus conforms to the imagistic pattern of fire associated with Heracles. Once again ἔπος is equating with with πῦρ through the figurative language of the *Trachiniae*, and metaphor anticipates Heracles death by desire. Sophocles thus revives the dead metaphor of fire-as-love, infusing it with new life to perform a dramatic function.

Selected Bibliography

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